



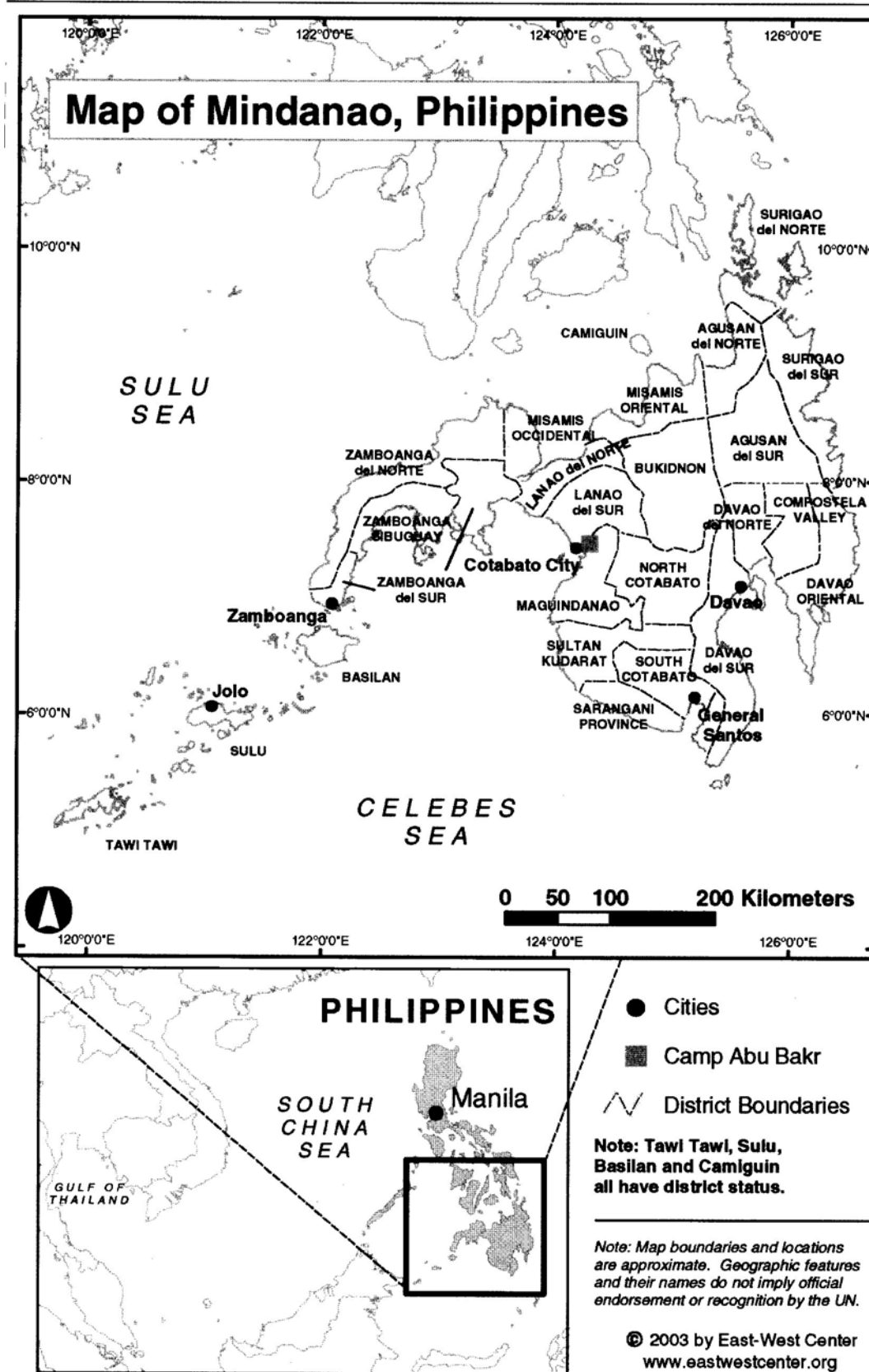
The Bangsa Moro: Fighting for Freedom During the War on Terror: The Muslim Independence Movement of the Southern Philippines

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**Paper presented to the Social Change in the
21st Century Conference**

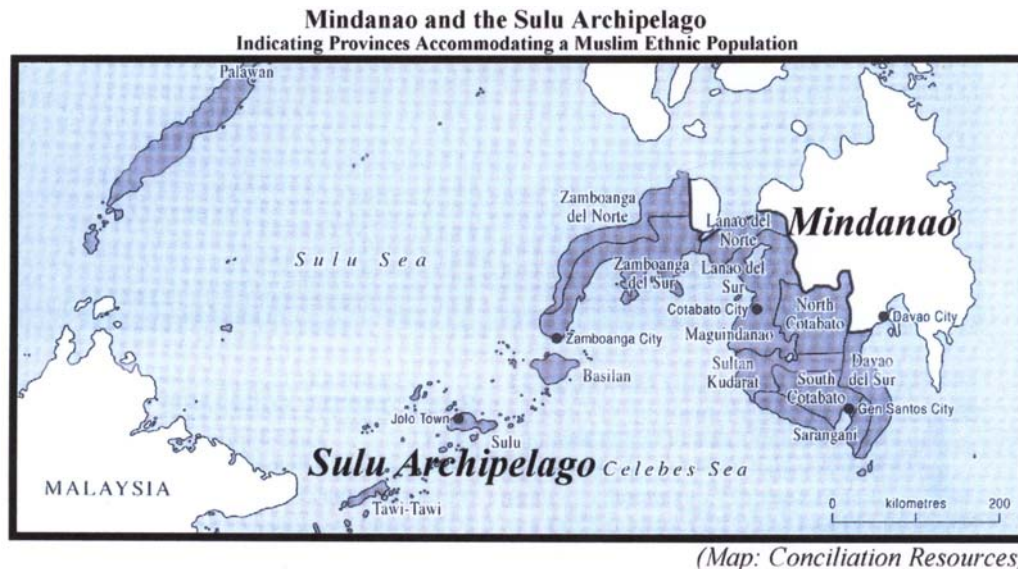
**Centre for Social Change Research
Queensland University of Technology**

28 October 2005



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Preface

Bangsa Moro is the generic name for the 13 ethnolinguistic Muslim tribes in the Philippines which constitute a quarter of the population in Mindanao, (and the southern archipelago islands of Tawi-Tawi, Sulu and Basilan, all in all approximately 4.5 million Muslims)

In 1905 Dr. Najeeb M Saleeby wrote in a book *Studies in Moro History, Law, and Religion*, 'the Moros are a law-abiding people, provided, however, they feel that the government that rules them is their own. They do not regard the present government as their own'. One hundred years on, the same sentiments persists with the majority of Bangsa Moro people of the Southern Philippines.

Prior to the original Spanish landing in the Philippines by the Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan in 1521, the population, consisting of Muslims and animistic tribes people, lived in a symbiotic relationship. However this was to change with the introduction of Christianity by Spain. As a result of the Christian imposition, war and hostilities occurred. The start of hostilities began with the first Muslim Filipino/Spaniard clash near Cebu in 1569. When the United States of America acquired the Philippines in 1898, following the Treaty of Paris, the Muslim population in the Philippines had in all but Mindanao, and a few islands in the Philippine archipelago, been either eliminated or converted to Christianity. The resolve of the Muslim Bangsa Moro, for self-determination

or independence has survived to this date, despite the impact of Spanish colonization, American imperialism, Japanese invasion, and Philippine industrialization.

The Bangsa Moro of the Southern Philippines would, if allowed, live according to Sharia law. This in itself promotes a conflict of interest, because Philippine law has as its authority the Philippine Constitution, and 'the Philippine Constitution still hovers above the Koran' (Vitag & Gloria 2000). There is no government policy which clearly discriminates against Muslims in Mindanao, however policies are formulated in response to popular demand, and since the majority of the population are Christians, 'policies can be biased in favour of the majority' (Lingga 2004).

Research Methodology:

This paper was researched using data drawn from primary and secondary sources. This included text analysis, statistical data, observations, ethnographic studies and personal communication from major players,

Introduction

An article in the *Economist*, in 2003, started with the statement: "when you check in for a flight to the island of Mindanao, in the Southern Philippines, the airline staff ask why you would want to go to such an awful spot. It is, after all, one of the few places, along with Iraq and Afghanistan, where America has sent troops to take on terrorism".

This paper chronologically traces the various hostile events and the subsequent peace attempts from 1972 to the present time (2005). The paper will attempt to answer why past peace negotiations were unsuccessful and what was the catalyst for the resumption of hostilities. As well the paper will try to determine why a sustainable peace in Mindanao involving its Muslim minority population was unattainable during the five Philippine administrations from 1972. They were, Ferdinand Marcos to February 1986, Corazon Aquino: February 1986- June 1992, Fidel Valdez Ramos: June 1992- May 1998, Joseph Estrada: May 1998- January 2001, and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo: January 2001- present time. Finally an analysis of the current peace talks, initiated by the USIP and currently being held in Malaysia will be made together with an analytical prediction of possible outcomes.

To better understand why peace in the Southern Philippines has been so elusive this paper will be divided into six episodes. They are [1] Introduction, [2] Historical Background to Hostilities, [3] Past Peace Initiatives, [4] Current Peace Talks, [5] International Implications, and [6] Concluding Thoughts. Episodes [2] and [3] address historical issues and attempts to explain why peace was so illusive. Episode [4] deals exclusively with the exploratory talks between the GRP and MILF which started in March 2003. Episode [5] addresses contemporary issues and questions relating to the relationship between the current peace talks and the "War on Terror". And the

conclusion will give three scenarios which may bring a political answer to this long-standing conflict.

Although the Bangsa Moro have been engaged in hostilities with various foreign and Philippine administrations since that first clash near Cebu in 1569, it took the imposition of martial law by President Ferdinand Marcos in September 1972, citing Muslim secessionists as one of the two biggest threats to national security, to act as the catalyst for an “organized” resistance by the Muslims of the Southern Philippines. However Marcos failed to disclose that the true reason for Muslim unrest, especially since the time of independence, (notwithstanding the earlier Spanish anti-Moro attitude), was the systematic minoritization and marginalization of the Bangsa Moro in the Southern Philippines, achieved by foreign education, and Christian immigration from the Northern Philippines. Whilst the percentage of Muslims in the Philippines has remained virtually static, the ratio of non-Muslims to Muslims in the Southern Philippines has risen.

Despite the Philippines having five administrations since 1972, and three major peace agreements and accords negotiated with the Bangsa Moro, together with a number of cease fires, the latest beginning in 2003, the situation still remains tense. However in May 2003, the U.S. deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage announced that the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), would initiate and facilitate peace negotiations, (referred to as GRP-MILF Exploratory Talks) between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP), and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). These latest peace talks may hold the key to settling the question of Muslim ancestral domain, in the Southern Philippines.

Historical Background of Hostilities

The Moro Wars 1569 to 1762

The confrontations which occurred between the Spanish and the Muslims in the Philippines from 1569 to 1762 were known as the Moro Wars. These wars were to last until 1762 when the British successfully invaded Manila.

1762 to 1898

Coinciding with the last two decades of the Moro Wars a revolt lasting eighty-five years (1744-1829) occurred on the island of Bohol in the Visayas. From 1829 until 1898 an uneasy truce was in existence between the Spanish and the Muslims of the Philippines. Although there was period in the mid to late 1890s, referred to as the “Philippine Revolutionary War” when Andres Bonifacio had limited success against the Spanish, the Muslims were not involved.

1898 to 1968

From 1899 to 1913, a series of protracted military campaigns were conducted against the Muslims of Lanao, and Cotabato, by American forces. (America had acquired the Philippines after the 1898 Spanish-American war) At the same time the Muslims in other areas of Mindanao were having their influence eroded by a massive inflow of Christian settlers under a government resettlement programme which was only stalled by the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in 1941.

Events Leading up to the 1972 Declaration of Martial Law

March 18, 1968 was a day which signaled to the Bangsa Moro just how expendable their youth was to further the aspirations of the President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Edralin Marcos. This day saw the murder of dozens of young Filipino army recruits on Corregidor Island in Luzon. This murderous event was referred to as the *Jabidah* massacre. These young Filipino Muslims recruits discovered all too late their true mission in training, was to fight fellow Muslims in Sabah (northern Borneo), which would have involved killing their own Tausag and Sama relatives living there (Whitman 2005).

The “*Jabidah*” massacre was widely recognized as the catalyst for the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The Bangsa Moro of the Southern Philippines now had an organisation which had as its key issue, self-determination. The first chairman of the MNLF was Nur Misuari, a lecturer at the Manila University. He had been a supporter of Mindanao Muslim separatism in his student days and now could realise his dream by heading a popular front for the liberation of his fellow Muslims in the Southern Philippines.

In a complex matrix of events, including further violence against Muslims, in massacres at Upi, Ampatuan, Manili, and Buldun by Filipino Christians, and political interference from the Marcos administration in local elections in Cotabato, the Bangsa Moro felt there was no alternative but to resist with organised paramilitary action. As the escalation of violence continued in Mindanao, foreign players came onto the scene. In the United Nations, Libyan president, Muammar al-Qaddafi accused the Philippine government of genocide and threatened to give aid to the Philippine Muslims. In September 1972, citing Muslim secessionists as one of the two biggest threats to national security and quoting themes of communist conspiracy, President Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law.

After four centuries of struggle the Bangsa Moro were still no closer to peace and independence. They also now had to contend with an administration obsessed with their destruction.

Past Peace Initiatives

The 1976 Tripoli Agreement

If President Marcos thought the declaration of martial law in 1972 would in some way, by force perhaps, see the elimination of the Bangsa Moro paramilitary forces, or the waning of Muslim enthusiasm for self-determination, then he, like his presidential predecessors, Roxas, Quirino, Magsaysay, Garcia, and Macapagal, underestimated the resolve of the Bangsa Moro. Marcos, disillusioned or frustrated at being unable to use the military for roles other than the traditional ones of defending the national territory and securing national sovereignty, was now able to use the military for regime support and to help implement governmental policy which included suppression of the Bangsa Moro separatist movement (Miranda 1985). However, rather than suppressing the Bangsa Moro movement, martial law had the opposite effect. Areas of support spread to other Southern Philippine provinces such as Zamboanga (del Norte and del Sur), Sulu and Maguindanao. As well condemnation of Marcos' action also came from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Whilst Bangsa Moro military units were engaged in combat with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), executive leaders of the MNLF were engaged in dialogue with Libya. In addition to all the international attention the Bangsa Moro was receiving, in July 1975, at the "Sixth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers", held in Jeddah, the MNLF was given formal recognition by the OIC. Meanwhile, this "civil war" dragged on, and by December 1976, the majority of the AFP strength was being used in Mindanao to fight the Bangsa Moro paramilitary. Such was the carnage and mayhem, that it is estimated, that somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 lives were lost, and 300,000 were made refugees, of which 200,000 fled to Sabah, Malaysia (Alim 1995). Faced with international pressure, and growing military casualties, Marcos reluctantly agreed to negotiate with representatives of the MNLF, and have representatives of the OIC act as interlocutors and conciliators. However, what is puzzling about the preparations for this historic occasion was the decision by Marcos to send to Libya as head of the pre-negotiating team his wife, Imelda Marcos in lieu of Defence Minister, Juan Ponce Enrile. Moreover, at the peace negotiations in Tripoli in December 1976 Enrile was "excluded". However a peace agreement was signed in Tripoli on December 1976, and granted full autonomy to thirteen provinces of the Southern Philippines. This only left eight provinces, mainly in the north and north-east of Mindanao, which would not have "Muslim" autonomy. At last peace and stability in the Southern Philippines seemed a possibility. However, future events were to prove this wrong, and before too long hostilities recommenced.

The Formation of the MILF and the 1987 Jeddah Accord.

No sooner had the Tripoli Agreement been signed, than Marcos, who probably saw a way "ease out" of the original agreement and implement the agreement as he would have preferred it to be, insisted on holding a plebiscite on the essential provisions contained in the document. When the plebiscite produced the result Marcos wanted, and the validity/legality of the plebiscite has to be questioned, the fragile cease-fire collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of lives were lost, and as many if not more refugees produced, huge amounts of ill-affordable money spent on armaments and equipment, and the dashed hopes of millions for a just and lasting peace were the costs that the

Philippines paid from the 1972 declaration of martial law to the signing of the Tripoli Agreement.

After the collapse of the Tripoli Agreement, many of the Bangsa Moro in the Southern Philippines felt that the MNLF, under the leadership of Nur Misuari was ineffective. Feeling betrayed by events, collaboration included, they called for his resignation. The bitter infighting in the MNLF which ensued, resulted in 1984 in the formation of a breakaway Bangsa Moro group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), headed by the vice-chairman of the MNLF, Hashim Salamat. This new Muslim paramilitary group which had Islam as its official ideology, was equal to the task of continuing Marcos' war. With the emergence of the highly organized MILF came solidarity with other *Mujahideen* (holy warriors), especially in Afghanistan, and in the early 1980s the MILF sent its most qualified combatants to the battlefields of Afghanistan

The Bangsa Moro of the Southern Philippines from 1979 to 1984 were undergoing a transformation, insomuch that the MNLF opted for dialogue, whilst the MILF was opting for confrontation, stating there was no more point in talking, and the only course of action was to return to military action.(Alim 1995)

With the lifting of martial law on 17 January 1981 it was to be expected that the Southern Philippines would return to some semblance of stability and freedom. It was not to be because many Muslims felt betrayed by the MNLF, who were seen as supporting Marcos, rather than supporting their cause. This mistrust in the MNLF leadership only sought to strengthen the MILF leadership of Hashim Salamat.

Elections were held in early 1986, however the results were open to question, with widespread fraud and intimidation being suspected. Such was the controversy created by these election results, that a rebellion was sparked by Enrile and Ramos, and this in turn signaled the intention of Corazon Aquino to legally contest the election result. Eventually, after massive demonstrations by the Philippine populace, Marcos left the Philippines, and Corazon Aquino, assumed the presidency. Almost immediately, President Aquino sought advice from the OIC and the MNLF as to the best way of achieving a lasting peace in Mindanao.

As a consequence of seeking advice from the OIC, a conference was held in early 1987 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In attendance were Nur Misuari, (chairman of the MNLF), and representatives from the Aquino administration and also the OIC. The basic provisions of the "Jeddah Accord", which it was known as, were the same as that which was provided for in the Tripoli Agreement, however this time all of Mindanao, was to be included in the proposal for full autonomy, as well as Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan.

Why then did this accord, with all its promise fail? There might have been many reasons, such as the haste of the new administration to find an answer to the Bangsa Moro question. Or the inclusion of, and questionability of Nur Misuari as the chief MNLF negotiator, (bearing in mind that Misuari was the chief Muslim negotiator at the failed 1976 Tripoli Agreement). However, foremost would have been the Aquino administration's failure to include the now highly organized MILF.

The 1996 Peace Agreement and “11 September 2001”

Aquino's reluctance to accept that the MILF was more representative of the Bangsa Moro than the MNLF, and that Hashim Salamat was more acceptable to the majority of Philippine Muslims than was Nur Misuari, resulted in wide spread contempt for her administration that triggered renewed hostilities.

President Aquino was to remain in power until 1992 when Fidel Ramos took over the presidency. Having come to power with a promise of achieving national reconciliation and peace Aquino achieved only had limited success in ensuring peace with the Bangsa Moro. Meanwhile the MILF was undergoing a highly organized structuring that included the formation of a Central Committee, headed by Chairman Hashim Salamat, and the appointments of Vice-Chairmen in areas of Military Affairs, Political Affairs, and Islamic Affairs. As well, ten committees were established covering, finance, intelligence, foreign affairs, health, military, information, education, religious and cultural affairs, communication, and transport, making the MILF an entity which was capable of forming a government if circumstances permitted. In addition, the MILF forces, now called the Bangsa Moro Mujahideen Army, was divided into Divisions, Battalions, and Composites, including Guerrilla Forces. All in all, approximately 120,000 fighters (Quimpo 2000).

After the 1992 elections, Fidel Valdez Ramos became President. Ramos, more so than his predecessors, realised the way to peace in Mindanao lay not only with peace agreements and cease fires but with a desire to eliminate poverty. Ironically, Ramos was now the second Philippine President to exclude the MILF from the renewed peace talks. Ramos' administration believed that the MILF and the MNLF were interchangeable, and as such negotiations with the MNLF would be automatically accepted by the MILF. At that time the MILF and the MNLF were antagonistic to each other and were in fact quite distinct geographically, and politically (McKenna 1998). Whilst the MNLF and the Ramos administration were negotiating the fledgling Muslim extremist group the Abu Sayyaf, which was formed in 1992, and was active in the islands of the Mindanao archipelago, now became active in the city of Zamboanga.

The peace and reconciliation talks which Ramos held with the MNLF were by far the most comprehensive yet attempted, and lasted from 1992-1996. The talks covered wide ranging issues, including the establishment of Shari'ah courts, distribution of wealth from mines and mineral resources and a comprehensive administrative system, all of which was proposed in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, but not followed up. Nevertheless the Ramos administration signed a new agreement with the MNLF, which was called the 1996 Peace Agreement. Briefly the 1996 Peace Agreement, arranged for the implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement in two phases. As well a transitional administrative structure known as the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) was formed, and its role was to supervise the implementation of the agreement during a three year period (McKenna 1998).

Ramos lost the next presidential election to Joseph Estrada. Estrada, having been accustomed to the make-believe world of the theatre as a “B grade film” actor, who had turned president, embarked on a course of arrogance, abrasiveness and corruption which led to his downfall and arrest less than three years into his presidential term. When confronted with the demand/request, by the MILF for talks to discuss the possibility of Muslim independency in the Southern Philippines, reacted by retorting ‘over

my dead body', and followed up with 'if they want war, I'll give them war'. (Vitag & Gloria 2000) To the AFP soldiers in the field, it sounded like an oblique order, and they reacted accordingly.

In January 2001 President Estrada was forced to resign through accusations of corruption, eventually being jailed in April 2001, and Vice-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo took over the presidency. No sooner had Arroyo taken charge than the Abu Sayyaf seized two American missionaries and eventually executed them. This now brought the US administration into the equation. The George W. Bush administration originally viewed the hostages as victims of crime, not terrorism. However, in a cruel twist of fate for the Bangsa Moro, the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington occurred on 11 September 2001. Because the terrorists who committed the attacks were recognized as militant Muslims, the Abu Sayyaf, and by association the MILF also, were tagged terrorist organisations and as such were now part of the "War on Terror" (Rogers 2004). In January 2002, 600 U.S. Troops were sent to the Southern Philippines as advisors to the AFP. As well as military advisors, the Philippine administration, received an infusion of \$2.4 billion in security assistance, as part of new operations against Muslim insurgencies in Southeast Asia (Kho 2002). President Arroyo, during a visit to the U.S. convinced Washington to remove the MILF from the list of terrorist organisations targeted in the "War on Terror". With the Philippine administration and the U.S. administration in agreement with each other regarding the "non-terrorist" status of the MILF, peace talks could once again commence.

Three major peace agreements, and independence and stability for the Bangsa Moro were still unattainable.

Current Peace Talks

In October 2001 the Arroyo administration and the MILF met for semi-formal talks; however these talks were suspended in March 2002 due to renewed hostilities, which coincided with the arrival of the 600 US military advisors. However, it must have obvious to Arroyo after the resumption of formal talks with the MILF in Kuala Lumpur on 27/28 March 2003, that the road to peace and reconciliation, through dialogue with the MILF was going to be long and protracted.

The First GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks: March 2003.

"Exploratory Talks" was the term given to the first reconvened meeting, and up to the 8th meeting held on 21 June 2005, the term has remained the same. If there was one area in which the first GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks fell short it was the failure to formally implement a ceasefire to end the then present hostilities. When questioned about this omission, by *Minda News*, Dureza said there was no need 'because cessation of hostilities is already part of the previous agreements and the parties had agreed to honour past agreements'. As a result of the lack of formalization of a ceasefire no less than 528 "armed skirmishes" were recorded between 01 January-18 July 2003 (Embassy of the Philippines, Washington)

The Second and Third GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks: May 2003

After the first GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, the Arroyo administration sought the help of the US Government in an advisory capacity. In May 2003 Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage announced that the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), would, in collaboration with the Malaysian Government, facilitate future peace negotiations between the GRP and the MILF. Malaysia originally felt uncomfortable with a U.S. presence at the talks, fearing that it may escalate the conflict. As well, (Santos 2005), believed that 'the U.S., being the superpower that it is, will always be the subject of theories of C.I.A. conspiracy and hidden agendas'. However, the USIP did become involved in the peace process, and to date is still encouraging the negotiation process in coordination with the Malaysian Government.

The Fourth GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks: September 2003

The GRP and MILF met for the fourth round of GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks on 5-6 September 2003 in Kuala Lumpur. Both parties agreed to research the issue of ancestral domain before the next round of talks. As well, the MILF agreed to the suggestion by the GRP that the World Bank be approached for assistance to rebuild the conflict-affected areas in Mindanao, in the likely event of assigned final peace agreement. (The World Bank approved this request on 7 October 2003).

The Fifth GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks: February 2004

February 19-20 2004, saw the fifth round of GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks held in Kuala Lumpur. Both parties supported the World Bank's Multi-Donor Trust Fund, which would be used to rebuild war-torn areas of Mindanao in the future. As well, it was decided at this meeting to accept the recommendation of Malaysia and establish an International Monitoring Team (IMT), to observe the cease-fire agreement forged in July 2003. Having agreed to this recommendation from Malaysia the GRP and the MILF requested the Malaysian Government to send an advance survey team to the Southern Philippines as soon as possible (Islam online 2004) The IMT was to initially consist of personnel from Malaysia. As well a request was to be made to Indonesia, Libya, Saudi-Arabia, Bahrain, Brunei, and Japan to also send observers (*Malayan News* 2004).

The Sixth GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks: December 2004

Ten months were to elapse before the next GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks took place. It may have appeared to the international community that once again the fragile peace process in the Southern Philippines was stalling, however, there were many reasons for this delay, not the least being clashes between the AFP and MILF troops in Maguindanao, and the MILF's insistence that AFP soldiers leave Bulik (a mountain

complex near North Cotabato Province where the MILF had previously had a camp). As well, the MILF insisted that before the Exploratory Talks could begin again, criminal charges against a number of MILF leaders accused of being implemented in bombings in Davao City in 2002/2003 be dropped. Also, if ever an incident was going to incur the ire of the U.S. and interrupt the USIP initiated GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, it was the premature withdrawal of the small Philippine military force in Iraq. This incident also invoked the ire of the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Hoshyar Zebari, who claimed the Philippines were giving into Terrorist demands (BBC News 2004). In an extraordinary comment from the Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, he likened the Government of the Philippines to a marshmallow. The U.S.A. was more cautious in their response, with the Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage saying he agreed with Zebari, but it would not affect relations with the Philippines. However, the BBC News, quoting a U.S. official, who agreed to speak on condition of anonymity, said 'we have to re-evaluate our overall relationship'.

The sixth GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, which were held on 20-21 December 2005 were significant inasmuch that for the first time it was agreed AFP and MILF armed regulars establish joint monitoring outposts in several conflict-prone areas. Spasmodic armed skirmishes were still occurring, (seventy-one were reported between 01 January and 30 December 2004), even though the IMT was formally deployed in Mindanao on 09 October of that year. As well, (and this would have significance internationally), the MILF reiterated at these talks, its complete opposition to terrorism and criminality.

The Seventh GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks: April 2005

Port Dixon, Malaysia, was the venue for the seventh GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks which were held on the 18/19/20 April 2005. These talks were widely reported on in the two major Philippine newspapers, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and the *Philippine Star*. The report in the *Philippine Daily Enquirer* is interesting, inasmuch that it quotes the MILF's leader, Murad Ebrahim, as saying the final aim of the peace process was to establish a Moro homeland in Mindanao. Given that the MILF's former leader, Hashim Salamat, was insistent that complete independence was the only answer, why was the new leader of the MILF now only talking of a 'Moro homeland' in Mindanao? The answer might have been that the MILF was now prepared to settle for some form of autonomy within the Philippines rather than the establishment of an independent state, in return for major concessions, such as a sharing in mineral resources. Also, and this could indicate that an agreement had been reached at an informal level between the GRP and MILF, the USIP Executive Director, Eugene Martin, stated 'independence is out of the question' (personal communication).

The important issue of ancestral domain was raised at these talks, and reported on in the *Philippine Star* on 19 April 2005. The *Philippine Star* defined ancestral domain as the cultural rights and property of ethnic Muslim tribes. As an indication of the importance of the question of ancestral domain in the negotiations, the USIP sponsored a four day workshop, on 24-27 May 2005, in Davao City, on this very issue. Moreover, and this was the most crucial area in the ancestral domain debate, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, issued an official statement saying the panels have scored several consensus points on

ancestral domain at the technical level which are acceptable under the Philippine Constitution (Office of the Press Secretary 2003).

In summing up the seventh GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, USIP, Eugene Martin, commented 'it does look like they are making progress, although I believe they have a long hard slog ahead on governance which I define as devolution of power, "genuine" local autonomy, control over political processes and resources etc (personal communication).

The Eighth GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks

Kuala Lumpur was again the venue for the eighth GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, which were held on 20-21 June 2005. Unlike the seventh GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, this round of talks produced no new initiatives. However, it must be remembered that crucial ancestral domain talks were held only three weeks before this round of talks, and not enough time had elapsed for official reports to be completed.

Summary of Current GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks

The success to date of the GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks is due entirely to the goodwill of the following: not in order of importance. (1) The entire MILF organisation. (2) The Arroyo Administration. (3) The Government of Malaysia. (4) The USIP. (5) The OIC, in part. (5) The continuing efforts of the IMT. (6) The Philippine media, for accurate reporting. And (7) The World Bank for the offer of assistance for reconstruction of areas of Mindanao.

It is important to put the role of the USIP, in the GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks into perspective. The USIP had as its executive director, Eugene Martin, a former deputy chief of the U.S. Embassy in Manila. Martin would already have been aware of the ethnic tensions in this country. The USIP, having facilitated the GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks since mid 2003, and having initiated the international ancestral domain talks in Davao City in May 2005, may well feel they are an essential, albeit inherent, part of the peace process in the Southern Philippines, but their importance may be overstated. When Rudy Rodil (head of the GRP Technical Committee at the GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks) was asked, what part the USIP played in the talks, his reply was they were 'aware that it was there' and 'trying to make a mark in the peace process', however, Rodil went on further to say the USIP is not let into the formal process for reasons of propriety (personal communication). !

International Implications.

Although President Bush had agreed to exclude the MILF from the list of international terrorist organisations, and his administration had directed the USIP to facilitate the current GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, the prospects for the MILF being "reinstated" into

the terrorist organisation listing is very real if the talks falter. There is a belief that should the peace process fail then the MILF may resort to, a loose coalition with Jemaah Islamiyah. Zachary Abuza reported that when interviewing unnamed MILF officials, some saw Jemaah Islamiyah as fellow travelers, whilst others were more pragmatic and saw Jemaah Islamiyah as insurance, should peace talks fail. At the same time that Abuza was interviewing officials from the MILF, Joseph Mussomeli, the U.S embassy charge d'affaires in the Philippines, claimed that the island of Mindanao is becoming a haven to terrorists (ABC Radio Australia 2005) He went on further to say links between Jemaah Islamiyah regional extremist network and Muslim rebels on Mindanao are growing. If this was not enough he warned that 'the island runs the risk of becoming another Afghanistan'. When asked to substantiate his allegations, Mussomeli refused to elaborate. These claims were immediately refuted by Ignacio Bunye, a Philippine presidential spokesman, who said 'Mindanao is being transformed from an area of conflict into an area of peace'. As well, MILF spokesman Eid Kabula said Mindanao will never be the similar to Afghanistan unless the U.S. makes it so by occupying Mindanao, as they have in Afghanistan (ABS-CBN Interactive 2005).

This now raises the question of why would Abuza, a highly respected international reporter and expert on Asian affairs, and Mussomeli, a high ranking U.S diplomatic attaché, almost simultaneously made such provocative statements in the middle of very successful peace talks. Were they echoing official U.S. concerns, or just passing on private judgments? Time will have to be the arbiter. It is true, that in May 2003, when the Abu Sayyaf was kidnapping tourists, (including Americans) from various Asian locations, that the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, James A. Kelly, wrote to Hashim Salamat and demanded that the MILF sever its links with international terrorist organisations (Santos 2005). However Kelly assumed that because the Abu Sayyaf and the MILF were Muslim organisations, then there was solidarity between them. This was just not the case. It is interesting to note that only six weeks before Abuza and Mussomeli made their comments, President Arroyo, at the beginning of the 5th GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, said 'the level of violence has been reduced to almost nil and international confidence is high' (Islam Online 2004).

The OIC, which played a leading role in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and the 1987 Jeddah Accord, and to a lesser extent the 1996 Peace Agreement, have been prepared to "sit on the fence" and observe the proceedings of the current GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks. There may be many reasons why they are not actively involved in these talks. Firstly would be the USIP's role as facilitator. Although there may be no antagonism between the OIC and the USIP, there can only be one facilitator at any time. However the OIC is closely monitoring the talks and during its Islamic Conferences of Foreign Ministers and its Islamic Summits of Kings and Heads of States, has an agenda item "Resolutions on the Question of Muslims in the Southern Philippines (Santos 2005). Secondly, the OIC had originally given official recognition to the MNLF as the leading organisation representing the Bangsa Moro, and has now to accept that MILF has taken on that role. The OIC may have to concede that in the 1996 Peace Agreement they were wrong in their choice of the MNLF as representatives, rather than "backing" the MILF. Or, thirdly, as Santos suggests that 'after more three decades, there is some fatigue in the OIC in dealing with the problem'.

Finally, in the USIP's special report 131, issued in February 2005, it was reported that the U.S. Administration views a settlement with the MILF as a means to contain Islamic extremism in Southeast Asia. It went on further to say that a settlement with the MILF

will be a big boost to the global War on Terror. This, statement no doubt was a relief to the Arroyo administration, who would not want under any circumstances, to have 4 million of its population either wittingly or unwittingly “enemies” of the U.S.A.

Concluding Thoughts

To achieve a lasting peace in the Southern Philippines, there is no doubt many political scenarios which could be put forward. It would be desirous if there was only one voice to represent the Bangsa Moro. The MNLF could reunify with the MILF giving the Bangsa Moro a universal representation. This reunification was first mooted by Hashim Salamat in 2001, but nothing concrete came of his suggestion. Nur Misuari, the chairman of the MNLF is currently in jail, awaiting trial on rebellion charges, which resulted from attacks in 2001, which were designed to delay elections in the ARMM. His incarceration further complicates the question of reunification between the MILF and the MNLF, because if he is found guilty, this could lead to the MNLF being declared a terrorist group.

Leaving aside the prospect of a unified Muslim voice at this time, and looking at a possible political solution to the problems in the Southern Philippines, there only appears to be three scenarios which would possible, and they are, (1) a totally independent state, (2) a government with “mixed member proportional with dual constituencies”, or (3) a federal parliamentary system.

(1) Totally Independent State

This scenario is not without merit. Mindanao could be divided in two, with the western provinces, including the islands of Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, and Basilan forming an Islamic State, and the eastern provinces of Davao del Sur, Davao del Norte, Davao Oriental, Agusan del Sur, and Agusan del Norte remaining as Philippine sovereign territory. Under such a division, migration would be inevitable in the initial stages, and this may involve problems. The division of an island state into two separate countries may seem radical, but it is not unique. The Caribbean island of Hispaniola is divided into the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The island of Timor is divided, although this did involve bloodshed.

The creation of a totally independent Islamic State may sound feasible, and even desirable. The reality of this ever occurring is remote. Rodil stressed that independence was out of the question. Zachary Abuza, in his role as a senior fellow with USIP, claimed the MILF for all intents and purposes has abandoned their demand for an independent state and are pushing for “meaningful autonomy”. However the possibility of an independent Islamic State, although remote, still can not be ruled out completely. In an interview with Antonio Lopez, from *Asiaweek*, in 2000, the MILF chairman, the late Salamat Hashim compared East Timor with the situation in Mindanao. He said ‘if East Timor became independent, why not our people’.

(2) Mixed Member Proportional with Dual Constituencies

This relatively new form of government has been in place in New Zealand since 1993. It has many advantages inasmuch that minorities are guaranteed representation even if they are geographically dispersed. Apart from giving representation to the Muslims in the Southern Philippines, the Muslims in Luzon and the Visayas would have representation if they chose to. This form of government would also give representation to the Lumads: the original indigenous inhabitants of Mindanao. Another advantage of this form of government is that a minority can have separate representation without being politically marginalized. As well the minority has a 'guaranteed level of descriptive representative without risking loss of substantive influence' (Nagel 1995). To enable "mixed member proportional with dual constituencies" to be the form of government in the Philippines would require a change to the Philippine constitution, by referendum. This may have a chance of success if there was consensus with the incumbent government and the Catholic Church.

(3) Federal Parliamentary System

Finally, a federalist form of government for the Philippines has the best chance of ensuring a lasting peace for the following reasons. It is advocated by certain sections of the Muslim and Catholic populations as not necessarily in response to the problems in Mindanao, but 'as a reaction to the overly Manila-centered workings of government in general' (Quimpo 2000). As well, the Philippine President, Gloria Arroyo, has announced that a constitutional convention will be called in 2006, to advocate a shift to a Federal Parliamentary system. Whatever form this takes is unclear at this time. And, whether the constitutional convention is ever to take place has also to be brought into the equation. Arroyo is facing impeachment charges, for alleged election fraud, and should they be proven, and Arroyo is dismissed from office, then the presidency would go to the vice-president, Noli de Castro, a former talk-back radio broadcaster. Like the former President Estrada, de Castro has little government knowledge, and was elected on his popularity rather than his administrative abilities.

If federalism is to be the new form of government in the Philippines, then the reconstructed country might take a form such as this. The Philippines could consist of ten states, four in Luzon, Three in the Visayas, and three in Mindanao. Nine out of the ten states could be predominately Catholic, and one state predominately Muslim (in Mindanao). Obviously the Muslim state in Mindanao would have to encompass Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.

Addendum

The peace process covered in this paper was up until the end of the eighth GRP/MILF Exploratory Talks, which concluded on 21 June 2005. The ninth talks were due in July. However the crisis in the Arroyo administration, pending impeachment charges, may have the effect of stalling, if not stopping the peace process. Arroyo's advisor on the

peace process, Teresita Deles, has stepped down. The government's chief peace negotiator, Silvestre Afable, has resigned. Informal talks on ancestral domain have been postponed for unspecified reasons. And, the vice chairman of the MILF, Ghadzali Jaafar, has stated that the Arroyo crisis has affected the talks.

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